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AUTHOR Bauman, Paul
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ABSTRACT

The four-day week is a popular way to improve the quality of education and save energy costs in rural districts. The four-day week is structured as a lengthened day or school year. Thirteen states have districts operating on four-day calendars. State laws and education agency regulations require districts to evaluate the effect of four-day programs on student achievement, transportation and use of facilities, costs, and reactions of students, parents, and staff. Reactions to the four-day week are generally favorable. There are some concerns expressed for younger students, those traveling long distances, and problems with scheduling programs and activities with traditionally scheduled districts. Six points should be considered when contemplating the four-day week: (1) state legislation to maintain operational and academic requirements;; (2) integrating four-day week energy saving studies with districtwide consumption; (3) calendar modifications; (4) making opportunities for activities and special instruction available; (5) evaluating research on the effectiveness of schools and student learning; and (6) input in planning from students, teachers, administrators, and community members. (MD)

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14. The Four-Day School Week

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14. The Four-Day School Week

The Issue

As school systems across the country search for ways to improve the quality of education in spite of limited financial resources, rising operating costs and fluctuating enrollments, some of them are experimenting with the four-day school week.

The four-day week is becoming particularly popular in rural districts that face budget deficits and program cutbacks. Schools started using it after the 1973-74 oil embargo as a way to save energy. In 1982, they report not only energy savings but also instructional advantages and some other unforeseen side effects. What issues underlie a shorter school week and a longer school day? Is the four-day week truly a cost-effective energy saver? Answers are important for state education policy makers who are cautious about modifying school calendars when increased instructional time is needed to provide students with the broad skills necessary in today's information society.

How Is a Four-Day School Week Structured?

To have as much instructional time as a traditional five-day week, schools using the four-day week lengthen school days or

extend the school year. Longer days often start 30 minutes earlier in the morning and end 30 to 40 minutes later in the afternoon. Elementary schools often cut the lunch hour to 30 minutes and provide a mid-afternoon snack or rest break. Class periods can be lengthened or an extra period added.

Where schools are closed on Mondays or Fridays, employees work four ten-hour days. Teachers' contracts are equalized with a regular academic year, subject to the same legal requirements and privileges. If state requirements permit, districts can combine the four-day week with other calendar modifications to meet specific needs. Some school districts in the Frost Belt, for example, have extended winter vacations and stay open later in spring to avoid high heating costs.

Where Is The Four-Day Week Being Used?

California, Colorado, Idaho, New Mexico, New Hampshire, Maine, Minnesota, Oregon, Montana, Florida, Utah, Washington and Wyoming have districts operating on a four-day calendar. The four-day week seems to be most useful in rural districts that serve large geographical areas.

Evaluating Four-Day Programs

State laws or state education agency regulations require school districts to evaluate various aspects of the four-day week, like the following:

- impact on student achievement,
- changes in transportation and the use of facilities,
- costs, and
- reactions of students, parents, and staff.

Districts generally must also demonstrate that the four-day week provides educational opportunities and instructional services comparable to those provided by traditional schedules.

The public schools in Cimarron, New Mexico, have used a four-day week for nine years, longer than any other public school district. Academic achievement has remained the same or improved, energy has been saved, and there is broad community support for the alternative schedule.

Faced with the loss of athletic and music programs, a small district in Oregon successfully switched to a four-day week with increased instructional time and no program cuts. Other districts in Oregon have asked the state education department to approve a four-day week.

Colorado schools started switching to the four-day calendar in 1980, when 12 districts took advantage of permissive legislation. In 1981, an additional 10 large, sparsely populated districts switched, and in 1982 five more districts changed over. Seventeen districts now close school on Mondays and 10 close on Fridays. In many instances, the fifth day is used for field trips, athletic events and youth group activities.

An initial evaluation by the Colorado Department of Education and Colorado State University's Office of Rural Education has shown that closing schools on Mondays save more energy than closing them on Friday. While the reasons are not yet completely clear, schools close on Friday do tend to use that day for extracurricular activities, which prevents intrusions into regular instructional time but saves less energy than if these activities were dropped totally (as they often have been when schools close on Monday). On the average, Colorado districts on the four-day schedule have used 7% to 25% less heating fuel and 23% less electricity then before they made the change.

In 1983, the Nebraska Legislature will consider a bill to allow alternative school calendars. The proposed legislation would require more academic time during a four-day week than a traditional week. It would also provide for school districts to share facilities and resources.

Recent articles report that reactions to the four-day week have been generally very favorable. Parents and students say the most significant benefit is the opportunity for families to spend more time together on the three-day weekend. Teachers are using the fifth day for class preparation, conferences, inservice training and personal appointments that would ordinarily interfere with their teaching time.

What Are Some Underlying Concerns?

Some critics have claimed that a lengthened school day creates problems for younger students and for those students who travel long distances to school. Some instructors say they are not covering as much material as they did during a five-day week. There have been problems with scheduling

special education programs and coordinating activities with neighboring districts that operate on traditional calendars.

Determining how much energy four-day school weeks actually save may be difficult. Even when no classes meet, school buildings must be kept warm enough (or in hot climates, cool enough) to prevent damage to equipment and supplies. Taking conservation measures (like adding insulation) may save energy more effectively than shortening the school week. Reductions in energy use in schools may be largely offset by increased energy use at home.

According to Sam Husk of the Council of Great City Schools, no large urban districts use the four-day week. Critics suggest that unsupervised students would create problems on the off-day. On school days, buses would travel during rush hours, lengthening the time students spend on them and adding to traffic congestion.

What Are Some Points to Consider?

Innovations like the four-day week frequently seem attractive at first, then less attractive as the newness wears off. Only time will tell if the move to a four-day week will continue, and long-term studies will be required to determine the effects of the shortened week and lengthened day on academic achievement. New practices are bound to create problems, but potential problems should not overshadow potential benefits.

Following are points to consider as experience with the four-day week accumulates:

- States can enact legislation to allow local districts to experiment with a multitude of school calendars that meet requirements for maintaining academic achievement, reducing energy consumption, and maximizing efficiency in facility operation.
- Studies of energy savings made possible by the four-day week can be integrated into more comprehensive studies of districtwide energy consumption.
- Calendar modifications can be designed to promote the most effective classroom management by teachers.
- Opportunities for individualized instruction and specialized activities can be made available.

- Extracurricular activities can be avoided during regular instructional days, and instead scheduled for the off-day.

- Research on effective schools and student learning should be included in the evaluation of alternative calendars since studies show that changes in the school environment can quickly affect learning.

- Districtwide planning should include input from students, teachers, administrators and community members who will be affected by a four-day school week and a three-day weekend.

What To Read

Four energy-related publications have been produced by ECS:

Bauman, Paul and Edith Petrock. Energy Education: Why, What and How? Report No. 181-1. Denver, Colo.: Eduction Commission of the States, October 1981. Available from ERIC* ED 211 347.

Petrock, Edith. Energy Education: A Policy Development Handbook, Report No. 142. Denver, Colo.: Education Commission of the States, August 1981. Available from ERIC* ED 207 831.

Petrock, Edith and Paul Bauman. Energy and Education: Planning for Higher Prices and Potential Shortages, Report No. 182-2. Denver, Colo.: Education Commission of the States, July 1982. Available at $4 per copy from ECS Distribution Center.

Petrock, Edith. "Energy Education: Another Passing Fad?" Denver, Colo.: ECS Issuegram, 1982. Available at $2 from ECS Distribution Center.

For Further Study on the Four-Day Week

Cohen, Mike. "Effective Schools: What Research Tells Us," State education Leader. Denver, Colo.: Education Commission of the States, 1982. Available at $4 per copy from ECS Distribution Center.

Bauman, Paul. "The Four-Day Week: An Energy Saver?", State education Leader. Denver, Colo.: Education Commission of the States, 1982. Available at $4 per copy from ECS Distribution Center.

Richburg, Robert W. and Edelen, Robert W. "An Evaluation of the Four-Day School Week in Colorado." Fort Collins, Colorado: Colorado State University, Office of Rural Education, 1981.

Odden, Allan. "Improving Schools with Limited Resources," ECS Issuegram Denver, Colo.: Education Commission of the States. Available at $2 from the ECS Distribution Center.

Lee, Felicia. "Four-Day School Week Gains in the West," USA Today. Washington, D.C., October 24, 1982.

"Schools See Four-Day Week as Change for the Better," Education Daily. Arlington, Virginia, June 28, 1982.

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